

# DUXBURY UNEASY WITH SIGN GONE FROM SITE OF "TREE OF KNOWLEDGE"

## Ancient Curse Laid on Spot Should Anything Befall Marker

By Lowell Ames Norris

Folks may not believe in signs in these enlightened days, but at the same time life-long residents of Tarklin, a part of historic Duxbury, are wondering just what is going to happen as the sign marking the site of the "Tree of Knowledge" remains conspicuous by its absence, while gangs of workmen, employed by the state, are hard at work widening and making more safe the "North Bend" of the Plymouth-Boston road.

For untold generations a local tradition has been cherished that dire things would come to pass if anything should befall the sign marking the site of this tree, from which the first American rural free delivery service was established in the days of the Pilgrims, when savages still lurked in the dark forests. The story of this curse has been passed along from father to son, until gradually the guardianship of the sign has become a sacred community duty.

### DUXBURY RESIDENTS STILL TRUE TO CUSTOM OF CENTURIES

To the outside world this may sound like an idle tale, but it seems very real to the residents of Tarklin, and especially to Harry A. Randall of Kingston, who has acted as custodian of this sign for the past 30 years, just as his father acted before him in a similar capacity for an equal period. To be sure, there remains little superstitious dread, but a custom of almost two centuries is not to be regarded lightly. For this reason, if no other, the people of Duxbury want the Tree of Knowledge marker put in its proper corner.

Many things have happened since its removal, several months ago, for the first time in a century; it was stolen the, but eventually recovered. When Custodian Randall started to set it back in its place difficulties arose. First, the state demanded that a permit be secured before the sign could be erected again; then, by the time the permit was received, the site was torn up in order that a road to accommodate modern traffic could be constructed. And now--well, nobody seems to know anything about it. Mr. Randall has the permit, but he is uncertain whether or not it is of any use. The Duxbury Rural Society has demanded action. Meanwhile the sign, the cause of all commotion, is stored in the private garage of Mr. Randall on Summer street in Kingston.

"Folks in these parts think a lot of that sign," said Mr. Randall to the Herald Man. "That spot has been marked longer than anybody can remember. Back in the days of Miles Standish there used to be a big oak tree at that corner where the 'Massachusetts path' met the 'Duxbury road.' At that time there was no post to Duxbury, so the runner between the Massachusetts Bay Colony and Plymouth used to leave any messages and letters intended for Duxbury folk at this tree. The custom continued, and soon this oak began to be known for and wide as the Tree of Knowledge, because from there all information was dispensed and gathered.

"The mounted mail carrier came into being and the volume of mail grew heavier. A box was then nailed on the tree to receive the mail, and left unlocked and unguarded until some local resident made the trip out from the village. Then the stage coach came, making three trips a week from Boston town to plymouth, and the custom was continued until steam

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succeeded horsepower. From such a humble beginning was inaugurated the sustem of rural free delivery."

To Wendell Phillips, scion of the famous orator, and for 21 years selectman, overseer of the poor and assessor for the town of Duxbury, belongs the credit of preserving for posterity the legend which is said to concern this historic spot. Mr. Phillips embodied the basic facts of this story into a dramatic poem, which some time ago he had published in a private edition for the benefit of his friends.

According to Mr. Phillips, after the establishment of regular railroad mail service the box at the far-famed tree fell into disuse except for chance billetsdoux which lovers occasionally slipped secretly into the opening at night, to make clandestine appointments. Some of the larger limbs were smashed and splintered by the storms. Time passed. A tar kiln was established near the oak to supply the tar needed to caulk the vessels in the 12 shipyards operating at Duxbury.

Then came a great storm in the dead of night when snow and hail, thunder and lightning, accompanied by great gusts of wind, terrified the inhabitants. Just as the clock struck the hour of midnight there came a blinding flash and a tremendous crash which shook the village of Tarkiln. The next morning the Tree of Knowledge which had watched the Mayflower sail into Plymouth harbor was discovered prostrate by the road. And so it continued to lie, forgotten and neglected.

Some months afterwards Tarkiln was thrown into excitement. One of the older patriarchs had a visitation. As in a dream, the spirit of the tree appeared to him and chided the community for failing to recognize the passing of the oak which in former days had meant so much joy and sorrow for the little community. The grim spectre threatened plague and other dire events if the spot went unmarked, and declared the spot would be forever cursed.

Trembling in all his limbs, the old man agreed to all the spirit's demands, and later told the villagers his fearful tale. In those days folks were intensely superstitious. All work was suspended until some sort of a sign was hastily put upon the site where the tree had stood. That was many years ago, and Mr. Phillips told the reporter that his grandfather, Augustus Phillips, as a small boy, remembered seeing a sign on that spot as early as 1818.

Since then, until within the last few months, the site has never gone unmarked. Health and happiness during all those years has been the lot of those who live in that portion of Duxbury which once was Tarkiln. Signs, however, have succeeded signs. The present custodian, Harry Randall, remembers three signs which were replaced during his father's stewardship. During his own time there have been three. The last sign was painted by the late Mrs. Fanny Burns Clark of South Duxbury. It portrays a stage coach of colonial days, stopping before the Tree of Knowledge, on which is prominently displayed the first rural delivery box in America. When it was presented by Mrs. Clark to the community, a special town holiday was declared, with exercises by the school children and the recitation of Mr. Phillips's poem by the poet himself.

Such a celebration is not anticipated this time, although many plans are said to be afoot as to the manner in which this sign shall be erected on the plot of land which once held the tap roots of this famous tree. One resident has suggested that the sign be hung from a tree of the

Another has proposed a marble memorial, while others, it is said, are considering a friendly contest among the artists who form the local art colony. It will be more elaborate than a simple concrete post, if Wendell Phillips has anything to do with it.

However, whether any of these plans pass the formative period or not, at least one thing is certain. The men and women of Tarkiln are determined that this marker, which is said to have averted misfortune and disaster for so many years, shall again hang from Tree of Knowledge Corner just as soon as it is humanly possible.

This will please Police Officer Eugene C. Merry, who now directs traffic at this spot. How can any one show anybody the Tree of Knowledge if there isn't even a marker to show where the tree once stood?

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